

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# Introducing North America's Largest Native Game Bird

By Dennis Bardi

**The wild turkey has staged one of the most successful comebacks in the history of wildlife management and expanded into areas where it was never thought possible . . . including Washington.**

**T**he turn of the century was a bleak period for the dwindling populations of many wildlife species in the United States, including North America's largest native game bird, the wild turkey.

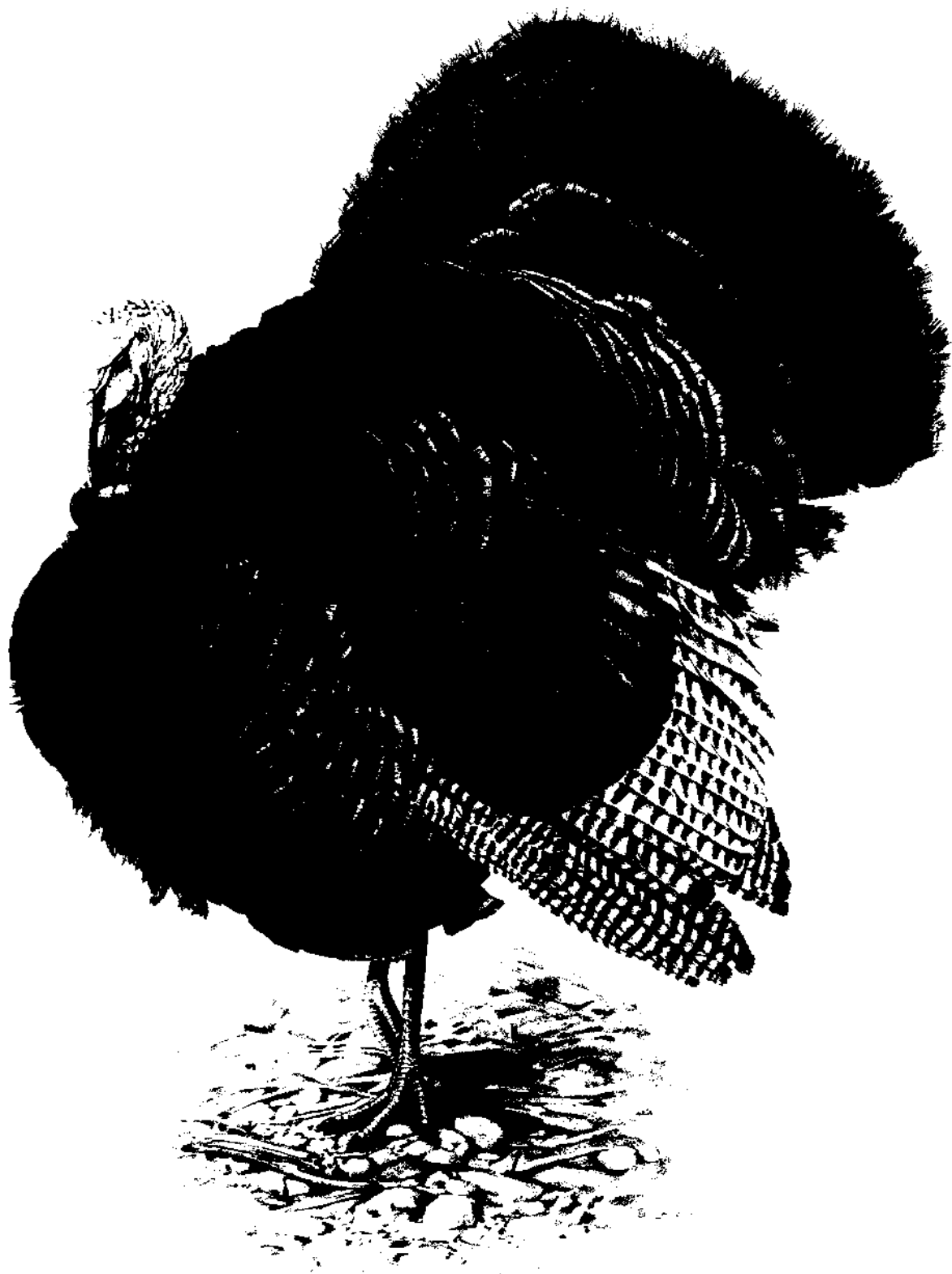
Although the wild turkey is not known to have been native to Washington, researchers in other states have discovered remains of this bird dating back to 400 A.D. Early Indian cultures used the turkey in a variety of ways. Many included turkey in their diets. Some made primitive awls from the bones; others used it exclusively for its feathers in such crafts as feather weaving.

The first European settlers found large numbers of wild turkeys on the East Coast, and they ate turkey regularly. As

settlements expanded, however, turkey populations declined, mostly through loss of forests and conversion of prime turkey habitat to agriculture. Blackhead disease, transmitted by domestic poultry, may have been another factor in the decline. Furthermore, no regulations governed the use of wild turkeys until 1900.

The severe decline and the fact that several states were unable to verify any population of the birds at all provided impetus for rescue efforts that led the way to one of the most successful comebacks in wildlife management. Today, turkeys inhabit all of the lower 48 states and Hawaii.

Because the turkey is easily domesticated, the logical solution to the problem





*Of five subspecies, the Merriam's turkey proved best suited for introduction to Washington. The adult gobbler, center, may weigh from 15 to 27 pounds, about twice the size of a hen.*

of augmenting wild turkey populations seemed to be raising the birds on game farms for release in the wild. But for several years all such attempts failed. Genetic deterioration and the inability of domestic turkey varieties to adapt to the wild led wildlife managers to abandon game-farm releases.

Transplanting birds from the few remaining wild populations seemed a better approach. Early attempts to capture wild stock proved difficult, and it wasn't until the cannon net was developed that wildlife managers had a practical method for catching the birds. The technique involve shooting nets from guns out over a flock, trapping the birds beneath. Once it became possible to capture and transplant them, improved forest practices and legal protection, as well as enthusiastic public support, helped speed the wild turkey's comeback.

As successful releases took place, researchers discovered that although much of its original range was gone, the wild turkey was capable of breaking ecological barriers and expanding into areas where it was never thought possible, including Washington.

**M**ale and female turkeys differ considerably in physical appearance. The male, or gobbler, is about twice the size of the hen, ranging from 15 to 27 pounds. Another noticeable difference is in the gobbler's solid-black breast feathers, which contrast with the white-tipped breast feathers of the hen.

The gobbler has a beard—a hair-like growth from the breast—that continues to grow throughout the bird's life. It is

brittle and breaks off easily, so it seldom exceeds 12 inches. The gobbler's head is bare and appears blue-white. It also has a wattle—a fatty fold of skin below the chin or throat; a caruncle, a fleshy, wart-like outgrowth which protrudes from the upper forehead; and a snood, or pencil-shaped growth which hangs across one side of the bill. Above its feet the gobbler has spurs, which are lacking in the hen.

### **Improved forest practices, legal protection and enthusiastic public support helped speed the wild turkey's comeback.**

Biologists divide wild turkeys into five subspecies, primarily on the basis of differences in their habitat, which are reflected in size and color variations. These are the Merriam turkey of the Rocky Mountains, the eastern turkey of the eastern United States, the Mexican turkey of the Sierra Madre in northwestern Mexico, the Rio Grande turkey of the northeastern Mexico and Texas, and the Florida turkey of peninsular Florida.

Biologists had tried several times to introduce the wild turkey into Washington, mostly with the eastern variety and all without widespread success. But in the early 1960s, the Merriam subspecies was introduced from Arizona and New Mexico into Yakima, Stevens and Klickitat counties. The garry-oak and yellow-pine habitat proved suitable, and the

birds extended their range. Wild turkey populations are now considered stable in five western Washington counties.

Turkeys are opportunistic feeders. They eat grasshoppers, millipedes, beetles, spiders, snails and earthworms, as well as grasses, fir cones, pine cones, mast of garry oak, snowberries and forb fruits.

The mixed fir, pine and oak forest provides the birds with food, water, cover, roost trees and nesting sites. Turkeys frequent the edges of clearings and fields, but seldom wander far from the cover afforded by the woods. They nest at the bases of large trees and disguise their nests with vegetation.

Roost trees are generally large Douglas firs or ponderosa pines in which the turkeys remain perched through the night. During bad weather, turkeys may remain in their roost trees until late in the day, although they may stay in the trees for up to a week during periods of heavy snowfall.

The turkeys' daily routine begins soon after daybreak, when they fly down from the roost trees and begin to feed. A flock may wander up to two miles in search of food and water, scratching to expose insects and roots beneath leaves. As midday approaches, the birds loaf around, dusting and preening themselves.

In the late afternoon, feeding intensifies before the birds return to their roosts. The turkeys enter the trees one at a time, with usually no more than two or three to a single tree.

The flock has a pecking order, from the strongest to the weakest. The largest gobbler or male is usually the dominant



bird. Communication or "flock talk" continues throughout their movements. Turkeys seldom fly unless they detect unfamiliar movement, such as might indicate the presence of a predator.

Yet predators are not considered a serious threat to adult turkeys. Foxes, coyotes, bobcats, great horned owls and eagles occasionally take wild turkeys, but a bigger threat to the flock is posed by nest predators: skunks, raccoons and opossums.

**T**he turkey's reproduction cycle begins in the spring. As with many wildlife species, the growing length of daylight stimulates secretion of hormones that spark the gobbler's courtship behavior and aggression toward other males. The bird's head turns bright red, a part of its courtship display. Meanwhile, the hen's reproductive organs prepare to accept the gobblers' advances. Both sexes become very vocal in their attempts to attract each other, with most mating activity occurring in early morning.

Once copulation has occurred, the hen can store sperm in a pouch in the ovum. There it remains active for up to 56 days, which means that mating in most cases need only occur once.

As the mating cycle peaks, the hens seek out suitable nesting sites, generally near water and cover. Turkeys are spontaneous nesters and do not build nests; they simply lay their eggs and cover them with available leaves or twigs.

The hen lays one egg at a time and leaves the site, returning in a day or two to lay again. Once she has laid four or five eggs, she becomes more regular, laying one egg a day until she has 8 to 17 in the clutch.

The eggs remain dormant until incubation begins. During the 28-day incubation period, the hen leaves the nest only for food and water.

The poults, or turkey chicks, will usually hatch within a 24-hour period. They grow rapidly on an insect diet and are capable of short-distance flight in about two weeks. At six weeks they can safely roost in trees. Hens and poults remain in family groups, while gobblers keep to themselves. By September, the poults weigh 7 to 10 pounds and are ready to face the winter.

**I**n the fall, when the turkey population is at its maximum, the Game Department allows a limited hunting season on the birds. The department has also established a mid-April, gobblers-only season

for shotgun or bow and arrow. The season takes place after the peak mating period, when the gobbler becomes "excess baggage."

A turkey hunter must display great patience, skill, perseverance and sportsmanship. He has no pointing dog or decoys to help him; he must match wits with his quarry by imitating a wide variety of calls. The yelp and cackle of the hen, contented clucks, purrs and whines are all part of the repertoire the hunter must master.

Even so, the turkey has the advantage, with its acute eyesight and hearing, and its powerful flight capabilities. Only 5 to 8 percent of turkey hunters are successful each year. The rest must be satisfied just to hear the sound of a distant gobbler or, more rarely, to see a gobbler's green, red and bronze feathers reflecting the sunlight just beyond gun range.

Yet for many of us who accept the unique challenges of hunting wild turkeys, experiences like these are enough to lure us back to Washington's turkey country year after year. □

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*Dennis Barci is president of the Washington State Chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation.*



*This release took place in the early 1960s in the Yakima region. Wild turkey populations suffered a severe decline at the turn of the century, but today they inhabit all the lower 48 states and Hawaii.*

